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ABSTRACT

Cultural differences contributed to the withdrawal of U.S. funding for the Support to Primary Education Project (SPE) in Cameroon, West Africa. The SPE proposed to increase the quantity and quality of primary school teachers and improve the skills of personnel responsible for supporting the teachers through technical assistance, training, and construction of school facilities. As third Chief of Party of the SPE project, the author observed cultural differences between the Americans in the USAID building and the Cameroonians in the Ministry of Education building: (1) Unlike the Cameroonians, the Americans observed strict working hours and their building was kept clean; (2) social relationships in the USAID building were informal (first name basis), whereas relationships in the Ministry of Education building were formal and revealed the hierarchy; (3) Cameroonians relied on an oral system of communication rather than a systematic paper trail; and (4) Cameroonian decision makers used polychronic time by which many topics are under consideration at the same time, while Americans use monochronic time where one focuses on a single issue. Also, different views on what is "a long time" resulted in the U.S. withdrawal of funds. The Cameroonians did not adhere to their portion of the agreement within what the United States perceived to be "ample time," although the Cameroonians had every intention of eventually following through. The Mission Director's tactful (American) way of explaining the withdrawal of funds, was misinterpreted by the Minister of Education, resulting in a feeling of betrayal on both sides. Future projects should plan programs to help both parties deal with cultural differences. (KS)

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CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND DECISION MAKING
THE EXAMPLE OF THE SUPPORT TO PRIMARY EDUCATION PROJECT IN CAMEROON

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A paper presented to the National Conference of the
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CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND DECISION-MAKING
The example of the Support to Primary Education Project in Cameroon

William B. Lee

This paper is about the Support to Primary Education Project (SPE) in Cameroon, West Africa and contains an analysis of the cultural context in which important decisions were made about the project. It is divided into four parts:

1. Background about the country of Cameroon and of the SPE Project.
2. The context within which decisions were made including contrasts of the American and Cameroonian buildings where I conducted business, the social relationships in them,the two organizations and the their decision making styles.
3. The different cultural conceptions of time and the use of eumphemisms.
4. Concluding remarks.

More information about the project itself is contained in a paper presented at last year's CIES national conference by William Rideout "Strengthening Basic Education in Africa, A Case Study: Cameroon which provides a description of the Project, and an analysis of it based on the World Bank"s seven recommendations contained in Education in Sub-Saharian Africa

BACKGROUND

The country

First a word about Cameroon itself. It is located on the West Coast of Africa slightly north of the equator, triangular in shape about 700 miles in length and 450 miles at its widest. It is somewhat larger than California (183,000 vs 156,000 square miles) with about 40% of the population(11,000,000 vs 26,000,000).

Cameroon has often been called Africa in miniature because its four geographic and climatic regions reflect the variety of the entire continent: the equatorial rain forests of the south, rising gradually to the Adamoua plateau in the center , which in turn yields to the lower and drier north of the Sahel,bordering Chad at the tip of triangle; and finally the northwest with its rolling hills and lush vegetation. Each of the four regions has two dry and two rainy seasons, the duration and intensity of would differ according to the location, with the south nearer the equator having the longer, wetter periods.

The country is composed of more than 200 different ethnic groups speaking an estimated 200 dialects and 24 African languages.It is the only bi-lingual country in Africa, two official languages being English and French, a combination shared with only one other country in the world,Canada.

The first dominant colonial power was Germany which in the late nineteenth century negotiated trade treaties with the local "kings". This influince lasted until the end of World War I when present day Cameroon was divided and became possessions of France and Great Britain which after World War II was changed to a trusteeships under the auspices of the United Nations. In 1960 after a plebescite East and West Cameroon(formerly French and British respectively) joined to become a federated republic and twelve years later in 1972 was unified. The government is centralized and divided into ten provinces whose governors are appointed by the central administration in Yaounde, the capital.

One finds both Islam and Christianity in Cameroon, the former predominantly in the north and the latter, both catholics and protestants, in the south. Animists are interspersed throughout the country and many combine their indigenous beliefs with those of the world religions. For example a belief in many spirits as well as a single God.

By African standards Cameroon is a relatively prosperous country with a predominantly agricultural economy that is generally capable of producing enough to feed its population. The main cash crops for export are coffee, cocoa and cotton whose prices are currently depressed as a result of a world wide surplus and so Cameroon like so many African countries is undergoing an economic crisis. Previously in the 1980's it enjoyed a period of oil prosperity which has now ended as its oil reserves are virtually depleted.

The project

In March 1984 the governments of the United States and the Republic of Cameroon (GRC) signed a bi-lateral agreement creating the Support to Primary Education Project (SPE). It was the largest USAID sponsored primary education effort in Africa,with funding of 27.6 million consisting of a grant for 11.4 million,the major portion of which was for technical assistance and training, and a $16.2 million loan largely for construction. The host country contribution was to be $73.1 million ,mainly in personnel costs and land acquisition.

The purpose of this agreement was" ...to improve the quality of life of Cameroonians living in the four provinces with the lowest rates of elementary school enrollments." This was to be achieved by ..."increasing the quantity and quality of primary school teachers and improving the skills of the personnel responsible for supporting these teachers.."

The project consisted of three components : Technical Assistance in Cameroon (in-service and preservice programs),long and short-term training in the United States,and construction of school facilities including libraries. USC was responsible for the Technical Assistance and while interested and involved in both the construction and long term training components did not have ultimate responsibility for either of them.

I arrived in Cameroon the first part of August 1987 as the third Chief of Party of the SPE Project and as a counterpart to the Director of Primary Education at the Minstry of National Education in Yaounde. At each of the project sites in the four provincial capitals an American teacher trainer was assigned as a counterpart to the Director of the TTC. Our educational team was completed by USC graduate students on one year assignments ,a total of five, and Peace Corps volunteers who were also credentialed teachers.

The Technical Assistance for which USC has responsiblity consisted of:

1. In-service training seminars for five groups of educators : Inspectors, Primary School headmasters and teachers, Teacher Training College (TTC) administrators and faculty.
2. Improved and expanded preservice programs at the TTCs

The in-service approach was two-fold. First were the national and provincial level seminars where more than 3,000 educators were trained after which in a sort of a multiplier effect the Primary School Inspectors using the concepts and strategies of the seminars conducted workshops at the school level for an additional 9,000 to 10,000 primary school teachers. To support these efforts an audio visual manual was produced and two guides on educational administration; both of the latter had French and English versions

To improve the preservice programs two curriculum guides were developed and utilized at the TTCs, one for the primary school teachers and other for teachers of technical education.

During the three and one-half years of its existence the SPE Project was evaluated four times . The results, some of which are listed below were very positive:

1. The rate of increase in school enrollments in the four Project provinces was greater than the national average.
2. The rate of the increase of girls in the northern predominantly Muslim provinces was three times the national average.
3. A marked improvement in the pupils scores in the examination for the National Primary School Leaver's certificate.
4. Improvement in the number of teachers who passed the concour professional the national examination at the conclusion of teacher training.
5. Increased use of active instructional strategies in classsrooms.

THE CONTEXT: TWO BUILDINGS TWO CULTURES

As Chief-of-Party I conducted Project business in two different buildings. The first was the C building of the Ministry of Education situated amidst a dozen or so governmental buildings lining one of the wider boulevards of the city.(There was also an A Building but for some strange reason no B.) The second was the four story structure that housed the USAID Mission located adjacent to the main business district and about one mile from the Ministry of Education and separated from it by the main thoroughfare that led from the airport to the presidential palace.

Physical appearances

Access to Building C was open and while entering it through the lobby on the ground floor one encountered numerous vendors ,some ambulatory others having their fixed areas,selling candy ,nuts, neckties and occasionally other articles of clothing, writing materials and newspapers and magazines.

My office on the fifth floor (actually the sixth as the ground floor does not count) was what one might call a walk-up for the three elevators worked sporadically during the first few months and then then stopped altogether. Even when they were operating the wait was long, the jostling irksome and the arrival (I felt at least) too problematic.

By western standards the building would not be considered clean for during the dry seasons it was permeated with the local red dust which became hard-to-remove mud during the rainy periods. The pattern of maintenance was difficult to detect although in the latter months a cleaning lady did sweep out my office weekly and cleaned the restroom on the floor as well. In Yaounde cleanliness and sanitation were always difficult as two to three days per week,on a planned and alternating basis, various parts of the city did not have water.

The working hours were 8:00-12:00 and from 14:00 to 18:00 but only a minority appeared at the beginning of the morning or afternoon sessions. The bus service was inadequete so most of the workers relied on a system of roving taxis(which comprised about 50% of the cars in Yaounde), so it was virtually impossible for everyone to observe the official hours even without the periodic mechanical breakdowns of the buses and taxis and the torrential downpours of the rainy season

At the USAID building access was controlled. For those who worked in the building or were otherwise known to the guards a nod of the head sufficed to enter but for others it was more complicated. Guards scrutinized visitors on the steps of the building and if satisfied allowed them to enter a foyer where they showed their identity cards and specfied their business to a supervisor behind bullet proof glass who if satisfied allowed them to enter an anteroom where they waited for an escort to take them through another locked door to their appointment. It was a procedure that one accepted as necessary because of the fear of terrorist attacks on U.S. facilities.

The working hours were scrupuously observed by American personnel who either drove their personal cars or were transported by vans provided by the Mission. As for the Cameroonian employees it was my impression was that those working at USAID were much more punctual that their counterparts at the Ministry of Education.

Once inside the building I was in the familiar territory of corporate or governmental America.Evidence of periodic maintenance was apparent: Floors had been swept,mopped and buffed,the desks and office furniture dusted, and restrooms scrubbed.

A walk through the building would reveal other reassuring cultural signals: open doors meaning the person could be approached(green light), slightly ajar signifying that one proceeds with caution not with routine matters that could wait but with important,urgent ones(yellow light) and finally the red light light of the closed door which meant that one entered only with the most urgent matters.

These recognizable yet unwritten rules of an American office were missing in building C where all of the offices were closed and one could only knock and hope that important work or discussions were not being interrupted. (Or perhaps as I will discuss later would not be considered and interruption at all.)

Of course, officials of the highest rank in both of the buildings had secretaries or administrative assistants serving as gatekeepers who controlled access to them.

The social relationships

Social relationships in the USAID building were predictably informal. All of the Americans on a first name basis with each other including the Mission Director who was third in rank in the American community after the Ambassador and his Deputy .I do not think that I was called anything else but" Bill" except in large formal meetings or when Dr. Lee was said with a tone of reproach. (The only exception to this informality in the American community was the American Ambassador and his wife for whom more stringent rules of state department protocol were observed.) Sometimes this informality was adopted by long time Cameroonian employees with their American colleagues who were perceived to be of near equal rank. While this informality may have been confused with egalitarianism and a lack of hierarchy by foreigners it seldom was by Americans.

In Building C the Cameroonians were much more formal among themselves usually referring to co-workers as Monsieur or Madame. The hierarchy was also much more obvious. For example on several occasions I have heard the Minister of Education and his Deputy referred to as Votre Excellence by those working directly under him.

I was always referred to as Doctor Lee or Monsieur Lee even by those Cameroonian colleagues with whom I had warm and cordial personal and professional relationships. And of course we always shook hands even if we met several time a day.

The organizations

A walk through both buildings would raise questions currently being asked about governmental operations around the world :"Why so many people" and "What do all of these people do". The American Mission had about 30 full time American employees and and an estimated 50 to 75 Cameroonains serving in a variety of professional, clerical and custodial functions.

Behind the closed doors in building C the bureaucracy appeared to be even more bloated. During the short-lived oil boom of the early 80's the government made thousands of lifetime career civil service appointments for the various governmental agencies. Many of these civil servants ,I have been told, have no work assigned and make no pretense of working while others do not even show up at the office. Their American counterparts would, I suppose, give the appearance of being busy possibly scrutinizing a piece of paper that would later be shuffled along to a colleague.

Although much maligned,a bureaucracy does have its defenders and its rationale. This project was funded by taxpayers monies with Congressional approval and subject to specific guidelines and performance indicators so it seems reasonable for those responsible to be held accountable. Critics of bureaucracies, and I am one of them, really target less the institution itself, which is considered a necessary evil, and more the personnel working within them who in their penchant for minutiae have lost sight of organizational goals. One hardly proposes abolishing bureaucracies but rather hopes for more entlightened interpretation and application of its necessary rules and procedures

Decision making

Because both organizations were bureaucracies, and as such were centralized and hierarchial, I rather naively expected that decision making processes within them would be similar. In many ways they were of course but one familiar landmark of American bureaucracy was missing. Paper. A systematic paper trail where important decisions are recorded and can be traced. Traditionally Africans have relied on an oral system of communication and that is not easily changed but there are also practical reasons. Paper was scarce and expensive and even when available one had to contend with duplicating machines(Xerox and others) that continually broke down with no funds available for either maintenance or repair. (This lack of paper is also reflected in primary school classrooms where often the teacher has the only book.)

Without a paper trail it is difficult and sometimes impossible to determine if an action has taken place. For example in the spring of 1988 a Cameroonian colleague and I spent a considerable portion of several months trying unsuccesfully to find out if an architectural firm had been paid(this was a crucial bit of information because if they had been, USAID would find it difficult to terminate the construction component of the Project). There was no way to trace the transaction once it had been approved and left the Financial section of Ministry of Education to go to various offices of the Ministries of Plan, and the Ministry of Finance and perhaps other Ministries that had to concur or approve before payment could be made. During the current economic crisis even the architectural firm itself could not be relied on to publicly acknowledge receiving money for if it did its creditors could demand payment and its employees their back pay.

I wish now to describe another aspect of Cameroonian decision making about which I have a hypothesis. When I went to see my counterpart, usually but not always with advance notice or an appointment, I went through the outer office(three or four people sitting around little discernible work being done. Americans would at least appear to be busy) before entering into his long rectangular private office. He sat at one end behind a massive desk while at the other end of the room around a small table were several others waiting to be summoned . While he was conducting business ,two or more could be seated in front of him and it was not always clear if they were together or waiting turns. Some of the conversations we would classify as personal such as the refusal to transfer a teacher because of the complaints about the headmaster, and yet no attempt was made to lower voices and the discussion could often could be heard by everyone else in the office. Occasionally he was interrupted by a phone call at which time he often spoke in dialect. He was thus able to make many decsions made in a short period of time on many different subjects.

This is most certainly, I would speculate, based on the tribal system of dispensing justice where villagers would go to the chief for decisons about problems which they individually could not resolve.It was probably no coincidence that each of the directors who were my counterparts were also heads of their respective tribes. After a visit to his village for a vacation one of them complained privately to me that he had no time to relax and was busy settling problems of his villagers.

Concept of time

The description of decision making in the previous section is an an example of polychronic or P time (Hall 1966) where many topics are under consideration at the same time and new ones introduced while old ones are still being discussed. This is in contrast to Monochronic or M time of the US and the USAID Building where it is one thing at a time. One focuses on a single issue or problem with new ones not introduced until the discussion of a previous one is completed.

Americans also tend to be punctual for "Time as Money" and to be late is a sign of disrespect as well as a real or inferred financial loss. Many, and for all I know all, ethnic groups in the US distance themselves from this middle class concept to one more flexible with with such terms as CPT time,Chicano time ,Hawaiian time, Japanese time etc.

Still another aspect of time was the basis of a conflict that would eventually lead to the early termination of the Project: what is a long and what is a short period of time. The situation was the following. The GRC was to pay the architects after which loan funds would be available from the US to construct educational facilities at the four project sites.(I mentioned earlier the construction component, and also the inability to determine if the architects had been paid.) This commitment was made before the depletion of oil monies and before the depressed prices of the Cameroonian exports after which the Cameroonians found themselves unable to pay their architects on time and they in-turn refused to submit their plans(if indeed they had been completed) before receiving payment

This impasse was never resolved and in fact the Americans withdrew the loan funds at the earliest possible date.*

The American view was this: the Cameroonains made a commitment and failed to live up to it despite given ample time to do so. Despite repeated reminders over a period of three to four years(a long period of time) no action was taken. During that period inflation was eating away at the loan funds so that only about 13 or 14 million of the original 16 million was now left. It was lazy money. Moreover not actually using loan money was seen by Washington as an example of shoddy management and could ,and later actually did result in a negative report by government auditors

The Cameroonian view was different: The money was a loan which would be repaid.(As a matter of fact Cameroon has one of the highest credit ratings of all African countries.) The current crisis was not predictable when the agreement was signed and certainly a two or three year delay should not be that important among friendly nations. What,after all,is the big rush?

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* There were in fact three possibilites: January 1989 the date in the Program Agreement(PRO-AG) between the two countries; November 1989 at the end of the contract between USC and USAID and August 1990 five years after the arrival of the first Technical Assistance.

Canadian officials told me off the record (There is a special affinity between the two countries as in both of them French and English are official languages.) that Canada would never withdraw money from a friendly country during a time of economic crisis. And of course for the French who have a long-term political and economic interests in this part of the world such reasoning would be unthinkable.

Embedded in this setback for both countries(for it certainly was a LOSE-LOSE situation) is a different cultural conception of time. To the Americans the three or four years was a long period for Cameroonians it was insignificant. In this respect I am reminded of a statement once made about the American view of international diplomacy being a poker game where a new hand is dealt every few minutes whereas the Russians saw it as being a long drawn-out chess match.

Saying no

Given the American reputation for candor one sometimes forgets our use of euphemisms, especially to soften the impact of unpleasant news such as death or loss of a job. A worker is called in, told how much his work has been appreciated, sorrow expressed that company finances are such that a retrenchment is necessary, and the best of luck wished in the future. We all recognize that this person has just lost his job without that fact being specificaly mentioned

Consider the following true-life scenario that occurred about one year before the project was terminated.*

The Mission Director prodded by Washington felt compelled to inform the Minister of Education that he was withdrawing the funds for construction mentioned previously. This action was being taken because the funds were in real danger of being transferred to projects in other countries. At the same time he wanted to be tactful and gracious so as not to endanger working relations between them personally or between the two nations. A meeting was called in which each of the men were accompanied by their key advisors.

The Director thanked the Minister for his cooperation ,lauded the success of the Technical Assistance and expressed disappointment that the construction component had not worked out. The Minister also regretted the tardiness of the construction component, explained that the economnic crisis had delayed the payment of the architects but now funds were available and gave his personal pledge that this would be done in the very near future so that construction could get underway. He then charged his subordinates present to see that his orders were carried out. He reiterated the importance of these buildings that were so anxiously awaited in the provinces and which would remain as symbols of the success of the Project long after it had ended.

The Mission Director replied that he appreciated the importance of these buildings and was optimistic that construction of them would be possible in the future and then he too he personally pledged to do everything within his power to see that this came about.

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*While I was not present at the meeting I did discuss it several times with the Cameroonians and Americans who were and am confident of the following account.

The meeting ended amiably with both men pleased with the outcome : the Mission Director that he was able to convey the withdrawl of funds in such a tactful manner and the Minister that he was able to save the construction component to which he was now personally and publicly committed. Unlike the hypothetical worker in the previous example he did not realize that the construction funds had been withdrawn.

This euphoria was to last only a few days, until the contradictory accounts appeared in the Cameroonians minutes of the meeting and in a letter sent from the Director of USAID to the Minister of Education.In the many times that I discussed this meeting with both Cameroonians and Americans their versions never substantially changed with the result that each side felt betrayed by the other.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Two issues were raised in this paper and each has a separate solution. As to the question of time, one need not determine what is a long and what is a short period of time to recognize that five years is not enough time to achieve long term educational development. Rideout makes the point in his paper (pages 21-22) that before Africans can plan long-term educator sector development programs the donor nations themselves must be prepared to make committments of more than five years. Such decisions are of course policy decisions controlled by the US Congress and guidelines within which Mission directors must work.

The second issue is that of sensitivity to other cultures and effectiveness in communicating interculturally. The meeting between the Mission Director and the Minister of Education described earlier is typical of cultural misunderstandings and differed only in its far reaching impact. In this regard I was somewhat surprised to learn that there was no program to help Americans deal with the predictable difficulties with cultural adjustment nor even an awareness that such assistance might be necessary. It would seem to be a wise investment of time and money(both recognizable American values) for each Mission to plan such programs for both their Cameroonian and American personnel.

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